

# Spatial dialectics and the geography of social movements: the case of Occupy London

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This paper develops spatial dialectics as an analytical method capable of exposing and explaining the contradictions, dilemmas and tensions that cut through the spatialities of social movements. Despite scholarly recognition of internal divides in movements such as Occupy, there is greater need to conceptualise the inherently contradictory nature of social movements, in particular by reflecting on the role of spatiality. Building on recent work on multiple spatialities of activism, the paper shifts attention to contradiction as a key factor in spatial mobilisation, further arguing that the recent turn to assemblage thought is ill equipped for such a task. Dialectics is introduced via Bertell Ollman's influential account of its ontological and epistemological bases, before turning to Edward Soja's reading of Henri Lefebvre to incorporate spatiality. Spatial dialectics disrupts the linearity of thesis–antithesis–synthesis, placing contradictions not only within the historical unfolding of relations but also within co-dependent yet antagonistic moments of space, through Lefebvre's 'trialectic' of perceived, conceived and lived space. Building on 'militant research', which combined a seven-month ethnography, 43 in-depth interviews and analyses of representations of space, spatial dialectics is put to work through the analysis of three specific contradictions in Occupy London's spatial strategies: a global movement that became tied to the physical space of occupation; a prefigurative space engulfed by internal hierarchies; and a grassroots territorial strategy that was subsumed into logics of dominant territorial institutions. In each case, Occupy London's spatial strategies are explained in the context of unfolding contradictions in conceived, perceived and lived spaces and the subsequent dilemmas and shifts in spatial strategy this led to. In conclusion, the paper highlights broader lessons for social movements' spatial praxis generated through the analysis of Occupy London.

**Key words** spatial dialectics; social movements; contradiction; multiple spatialities; Occupy London; militant research

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## Introduction

2011 was a remarkable year for social movements, with 'Occupy' setting up protest camps in hundreds of North American cities in September before going global on 15 October, the day it took root in London. Like other movements of 2011, Occupy London was an explosion of rage and hope (Castells 2012) that sought to critique the systemic failures of neoliberal capitalism and develop working alternatives for a more just and democratic society. As the movement took form in the protest camp, however, internal contradictions became clearly visible, contradictions that cut through the multiple spatialities through which the movement mobilised and developed, and which played an important role in the initial demise of Occupy London.<sup>1</sup> First, the seemingly global movement that claimed to

represent the '99 per cent' became increasingly tied to the physical space of occupation. Second, Occupy sought to prefigure a space for horizontal organisation yet hierarchies developed around class and gender. Third, the attempt to pursue a progressive territorial strategy of occupation was subsumed within the practices of dominant territorial institutions. How can these contradictions be explained and what was their wider significance?

I argue that dialectics is a useful conceptual framework for analysing phenomena such as Occupy London and explaining contradictions in their spatial praxis. The dialectical concept of contradiction – a mutually supportive yet undermining relationship – has been relatively underexplored in analyses of social movements compared with studies of capital (e.g. Harvey 2014). Social movement literature often highlights

internal tensions and dilemmas, including recent work on Occupy (Juris *et al.* 2012; Rohgalf 2013; Sbicca and Perdue 2014). Yet there has been less attempt to analyse the inherently contradictory nature of social movement mobilisation and the implications this has for their spatial strategy. Recent theorising of social movement spatialities implicitly points in this direction (Miller 2013; Nicholls 2009) but stops short at elaborating an explicitly dialectical approach, and the latest turn to assemblage analysis risks downplaying the antagonistic nature of spatial mobilisation (Davies 2012; McFarlane 2009). While helpful for understanding how people and things come together to allow a social movement to work (or not), assemblage thought is ill equipped for explaining contradiction and abstracting to broader historical and geographical moments. Integrating dialectical and spatial analyses of social movements provides a framework for understanding how and why contradictions inevitably develop in the course of mobilising particular spatial strategies.

The paper makes a specific contribution in the burgeoning literature on the geography of social movements by developing spatial dialectics as an analytical method through which scholars can expose and make sense of the contradictions, dilemmas and tensions that cut through the spatialities of social movements, abstracting from the vantage points of both temporality and spatiality. Building on Soja's (1996) reading of Henri Lefebvre, spatial dialectics provides a means for grappling with the simultaneity of spatial contradiction, disrupting the linearity of thesis–antithesis–synthesis and placing contradictions not only within the historical unfolding of supportive yet undermining relationships (e.g. changing relation between activists and the state) but also within co-dependent yet antagonistic moments of space, through Lefebvre's 'trialectic' of perceived, conceived and lived space. In developing spatial dialectics, this paper takes forward recent attempts to develop frameworks for analysing multiple spatialities (Jessop *et al.* 2008; Leitner *et al.* 2008; Miller 2013) by exploring how and why contradictions develop among different spatial moments and the implications this has on social movement strategy. After outlining an understanding of dialectics, drawing in particular on Bertell Ollman, the following section builds on Edward Soja to spatialise dialectics as a method for analysing social movement geography. The remainder of the paper puts spatial dialectics to work in an analysis of three cuts of Occupy London's spatial praxis, organised around the contradictions described in the opening paragraph. Across these cuts, the paper draws out how contradictions unfold in the course of spatial mobilisation, considering their broader historical and geographical moments. The conclusion pulls out wider lessons on the contradictory nature of social movement spatiality.

## Dialectics

Dialectics is a mode of thinking that seeks to engage with and understand a world in flux that can be traced through Western thought at least to the ancient Greeks (Ollman and Smith 2008). Much contemporary use refers to dialectics in the philosophy by Hegel – who presented an idealist understanding of history as a process of constantly resolving contradictions – and in particular following Marx's materialist re-reading which sought to expose the 'contradictions inherent in the movement of capitalist society' (Marx 1976, 103). Although Marx rarely discussed dialectics in any detail – his 1857 Introduction being the prime example (Marx 1973, 100–9) – there have been ongoing attempts to develop his 'method' since then (e.g. Jameson 2009; Lefebvre 2009; Lukács 1971), including in human geography since the late 1960s (Castree 1996; Harvey 1996). Bertell Ollman (2003) has provided one of the most detailed works on Marx's method and his account of the ontological and epistemological moments of dialectics provides a useful starting point.

Following Ollman (1976 2003), Marx's dialectical ontology is a 'philosophy of internal relations' in which all 'things' are conceived of as relations. Unlike the 'common sense' view of relations as 'spatio-temporal ties' with other things, Ollman (2003, 36) highlights that Marx interiorised relations in things (for example, the class relation in the commodity form). Dialectics dissolves the apparent independence of parts and wholes and instead 'views the whole as the structured interdependence of its parts' (Ollman 2003, 140; see also Harvey 1996, 48–55). Examining the internal relation of any part thus brings to light the whole, something often understood as 'totality' in which 'all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other' (Lukács 1971, 13). In an unstable world of flux and flow, relations are both mutually supporting and undermining and are thus contradictory: 'undoubtedly the most important' aspect of Marx's relational ontology (Ollman 2003, 17). This is because contradiction allows Marx to avoid a static and one-sided view of capitalism and to understand change as immanent to capitalist development (Harvey 2014; Ollman 2003). Marx's dialectics provides no synthesis, as some readings of Hegel imply, but demonstrates the immanent 'power of the negative' that sets in motion a 'going beyond' (Lefebvre 1968, 6), a constant 'movement of breaking and opening' (Holloway *et al.* 2009, 8).

If internal relations are key to Marx's dialectical ontology, then it is the process of abstraction that is central to his epistemology (Ollman 2003). In his 1857 Introduction, Marx describes the 'method of political economy' as a movement of abstracting from the 'real concrete' – our initial 'chaotic conception of the

whole' – towards ever simpler determinations, or 'thinner abstractions', in order to finally arrive at a 'rich totality of many determinations and relations' (1973, 100–1). Ollman summarises abstraction as an 'intellectual activity of breaking' the world as it appears to us into 'mental units with which we think about it' (2003, 60). Abstraction takes place at different levels of extension (the spatial and temporal boundaries used in analysis), levels of generality (from the most unique to general characteristics of any entity) and vantage points (the perspective from which to view other components, e.g. the workers or capitalists) (Ollman 2003). This allows dialectics to expose and understand the existence of change and interaction within any form or relation, thus bringing to life the contradictory movement of social relations, at once mutually supporting and undermining.

Alongside Marxist understandings of dialectical analysis that operate at the level of generality of the capitalist mode of production (Ollman 2003), focusing on how social relations tend to internalise contradictions of capital (see Harvey 2014), dialectics also provides a broader framework for analysing how and why contradictory social relations arise and develop in the course of human organisation and interaction. The historical work of Mann (1986) is particularly helpful for pointing towards social power, rather than capital, as a basis for dialectical analysis. As he summarises:

In pursuit of their goals, humans enter into cooperative, collective power relations with one another. But in implementing collective goals, social organization and a division of labor are set up. (1986, 6–7)

These divisions can lead to core contradictions in social organisation, with social groups creating the conditions for their own domination. Through abstraction, dialectics helps make sense of how particular contradictory social relations develop and unfold historically, rather than naturally pre-exist. Yet contradictory social relations do not unfold on the head of a pin (Miller and Martin 2000) and incorporating spatiality into dialectics has significant implications for how the method is put to work.

## Spatial dialectics and social movements

Despite David Harvey's longstanding effort to insert geography into historical materialism (and vice-versa) (see Harvey 1973; Sheppard 2006), it has been Edward Soja, via his reading of Lefebvre, who has done most in developing a spatialised dialectic. Harvey has long taken the view that dialectics is at the core of Marx's method (see especially Harvey 1996) and has sought to apply this approach to his analysis of space-time (most clearly achieved in Harvey 2006). Yet Soja (1996) extends this and, building on Lefebvre (1976 1991),

argues for the spatialisation of the dialectic itself, inserting a third term into the duality of historicity-sociality. In a first step, Soja (1980) re-iterated Lefebvre's argument that the production of space and society is a co-constitutive dialectic, thus clarifying concerns of Harvey (1973) and Castells (1977) that Lefebvre was seemingly fetishising space as an autonomous field with a capacity to externally shape human activity. This concern has been carefully revisited by Charnock (2014, 318), who holds that those who follow Lefebvre risk being 'lost in space' which, at worst, could lead to an 'affirmative notion of emancipatory politics' of the sort that led to the fetishisation of space in many Occupy camps. Yet Soja's reading of Lefebvre develops a 'socio-spatial dialectic' in which space is neither a 'separate structure with its own autonomous laws' nor a mere 'expression of the ... social (i.e. aspatial) relations of production', but 'simultaneously social and spatial' (1980, 208). In a second step, Soja (1996) develops the notion of trialectics to incorporate spatiality, historicity and sociality as three moments of the dialectic.

Incorporating spatiality has consequences for dialectical analysis. Spatial dialectics does not deny that tensions and contradictions unfold historically in society but disrupts a linear view of social change. Space is the realm of simultaneity (Massey 2005, 9) and the spatiality of contradictory relations intersects and interrupts the historical moment of social organisation. Specifically, Soja (1996) opens up the spatiality of trialectics into Lefebvre's seminal triad of spatial moments: material spatial practice (perceived space); representations of space (conceived space) and spaces of representation (lived space). This provides a clear framework from which to insert spatiality into dialectical analyses, acknowledging how historical social relations unfold through contradictions in moments of space. Lefebvre's spatial triad has informed much work in human geography (see Harvey 2006) and has started to be applied to social movement analysis (e.g. Garmany 2008; Uitermark 2004). Miller (2013) recently integrated Lefebvre's triad with discussions on multiple spatialities of activism, providing an excellent starting point for a spatial dialectical analysis of social movements. This paper embraces such an approach but makes the explicitly dialectical move to explore how contradictions arise and unfold within and between different spatial moments of activism, thus drawing out the inherent tensions of spatial strategies.

Spatial dialectical analysis acknowledges, and seeks to explain, the contradictions that develop in social movements as they mobilise across space, something that the recent turn to assemblage analyses of social movement spatiality fails to do. Assemblage is a broad term used by geographers to emphasise 'gathering, coherence and dispersion' of 'heterogeneous elements

that may be human or non-human, organic and inorganic, technical and natural' (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 124). Like dialectics, assemblage provides a relational approach orientated towards the co-constitution of wholes and parts (Sheppard 2008). Assemblage has been useful to studies of social movements by moving away from tendencies to reify spatialities (e.g. network, territory) and ground them in the specific contexts through which they are produced (Davies 2012). Moreover, assemblage has expanded understandings of agency, theorising it as diffuse and distributed across multiple actants and processes involved in social movements (McFarlane 2011). This has led to richer empirical accounts of social movement spatiality. Yet assemblage thought is much less useful for understanding and explaining contradictions in social movement spatialities and risks downplaying their inherently contradictory nature.

Assemblage thinking is oriented towards researching how different components are gathered and assembled (or 'plugged and unplugged') into provisional unities that allow for some form of transformation, with little interest in exploring antagonism or abstracting to historical and spatial moments beyond the assemblage (see Anderson *et al.* 2012; McFarlane 2011). Assemblages focus attention on 'latent possibilities' that emerge not from antagonistic relations but through the 'lines of flight' that are generated in the process of assembling (McFarlane 2011, 211), and reject any underlying contradictions that guide social processes (Brenner *et al.* 2011). Moreover, assemblages' ontology of 'relations of exteriority' (Anderson *et al.* 2012, 177) refuses to abstract beyond the surface appearances of what Marx (1973, 100) would term the 'chaotic conceptions' gathered in rich empirical data. Assemblage thought is thus ontologically and epistemologically ill equipped to understand and explain the contradictions of social movement spatiality.

Spatial dialectics takes forward research on social movement spatiality by explicitly outlining an approach that explains how and why tensions develop in spatial strategy. There is now a wealth of studies demonstrating the significance of particular spatialities, such as place (Routledge 1993), scale (Miller 2000) and networks (Featherstone 2008), for social movement mobilisation, with recent work examining the complication of multiple spatialities to contentious politics (Jessop *et al.* 2008; Leitner *et al.* 2008; Nicholls *et al.* 2013). Across this work are examples of dilemmas appearing in spatial strategies, for example how networking is distorted by the weight of particular nodes (people or places) (Routledge 2008) or how right to the city movements fall into a 'local trap' (Purcell 2006). Research on urban social movements has been most effective at drawing out tensions in activists' spatial praxis, highlighting systemic contradictions at

play in the city (Cox 2001; Harvey 2012; Miller and Nicholls 2013; Mitchell 2003; Nicholls 2011). Spatial dialectics takes this forward by exposing the inherently contradictory nature of social movement spatialities. Specifically, it directs attention to how contradictions unfold in the context of both historical and geographical moments of social movements, examining how spatial strategies involve mutually supportive yet undermining relations that require activists to shift priorities between spatialities, in turn creating further dilemmas. This provides critical perspectives on the success and failure of social movements.

## Researching Occupy London

Understanding the dilemmas facing Occupy London was a key concern for my research at both a theoretical and political level. Methodologically, I built on a rich tradition of militant research, which I understand as 'a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward' (Halvorsen 2015a, 469). Through my active involvement, I generated a close understanding of Occupy London and the challenges that arose in its spatial strategies, largely tied to the occupation of space in the 'public' courtyard of a Cathedral in London's financial district. Formally, this involved a seven-month period of 'engaged ethnography' (Mathers and Novelli 2007) along with 43 in-depth interviews with fellow occupiers (all names have been changed) and an analysis of representations of space (e.g. media, legal) produced by Occupy London. The research spanned August 2011 to June 2012, covering the initial, camp-based phase of Occupy and the immediate post-eviction period in which many occupiers began to generate new spatial strategies.

My positionality – intimately tied up with internal experiences and debates in the movement – was such that taking an explicitly dialectical approach to my research analysis was a helpful, if challenging, move. There is a risk with militant research that the activist-researcher becomes so committed to the particular 'situation' of struggle (Colectivo Situaciones 2003) that they become blind to the broader totality of struggles within which it is located (Halvorsen 2015a). Dialectics forces a confrontation with the inevitably partial and limited context of a struggle (something that assemblage approaches also risk forgetting) and encourages a more critical stance. There remains a challenge in building a relationship between the moments of analysis and praxis, although this is not unique to dialectics and a fuller discussion lies beyond this paper (see Kindon *et al.* 2007; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007).

Spatial dialectics also provides a useful approach for analysing Occupy by moving beyond partial accounts of



internal activist divides. Much research has pointed out the development of internal tensions within Occupy movements, often explained by the limitations of particular forms, such as the tendency of non-hierarchical assemblies to be dominated by participants able to attend hours of meetings (Lupo 2014; Smith and Glidden 2012), or the ways in which particular racial or ethnic power relations manifested themselves in regional contexts (Khatib *et al.* 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012). Spatial dialectics moves a step further to highlight the inherently contradictory nature of social movement mobilisation, pointing to tensions that arise when mobilising across particular spatialities and the contradictory spatial strategies developed in response. Spatial dialectics thus counters a tendency to romanticise forms of resistance (Sparke 2008) and focuses attention on the contradictions of all spatial praxis.

In what follows I present a spatial dialectic analysis of Occupy London organised around three cuts. Each cut draws out a core contradiction in Occupy London's spatial strategy that my research exposed: a global movement tied to a physical space of occupation; a prefigurative space engulfed by internal hierarchies; and a grassroots territorial strategy that was subsumed into logics of dominant territorial institutions. In examining distinct spatial strategies, these cuts speak to recent work on the multiple spatialities of activism (Leitner *et al.* 2008; Nicholls *et al.* 2013) incorporating 'autonomous geographies' (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006) as an increasingly important spatiality (or set of spatialities) of creative resistance that is often marginalised by a focus on contention in social movements (cf. Clough and Blumberg 2012; Springer *et al.* 2012). Most importantly, these cuts give the reader an insight into how spatial dialectics might be put to work in social movement analysis.

## Networks and the protest camp

Occupy London was mobilised as part of a global movement seeking to simultaneously challenge capitalist institutions (e.g. the Stock Exchange) and create working alternatives. On 15 October 2011, approximately 3000 people gathered outside St Paul's Cathedral following a callout to 'Occupy the London Stock Exchange', setting up a protest camp that lasted four and a half months, followed by a second, smaller camp and a number of buildings that were occupied during the period leading up to May 2012. During this period, the 'space of representation' of Occupy's networks – a global movement seeking radical structural change – became increasingly tied and trapped to the place of protest (i.e. camp), which acted as a barrier to occupiers' perceived and conceived spaces of activism, limiting the movement's capacity to identify and mobilise across more topological connections.

Occupy London appeared as part of a global lived space of social change through the desires and imaginations that resonated across hundreds of cities worldwide in 2011. Some occupiers spoke of direct inspiration from what was happening elsewhere. As occupier Jonny said: 'I saw Occupy Wall Street and that had implanted in me that desire to just be involved'. Putting up camp on 15 October, occupiers produced representations of space that identified with extensive networks – from the universal 'we are the 99%' to specific solidarity with Tahrir Square and others – that informed occupiers' sense of radical possibility.<sup>2</sup> Yet just days into the occupation it was clear that Occupy London's lived space was radically shrinking, getting trapped by the place-based strategy of the protest camp.

When I interviewed Juan, one of the few occupiers who maintained a commitment to building relations with social movements from the global south, which he did through a solidarity information tent he constructed on camp, he told me of the lack of support and interest he received on camp:

people just weren't that interested ... and not many people stopped and looked at [the tent], it was really very difficult, people just had this attitude of like we are already at the occupation, we are already doing what is necessary and what you're talking about is just slightly unnecessary, it was a surplus requirement ...

Juan's frustration was not isolated and my own participation in the International working group demonstrated a similar trend. While a small number of occupiers (largely international themselves) attempted to build networks for communication and, potentially, organisation with movements elsewhere, there was little time, energy or enthusiasm for developing this initiative in the camp's general assemblies and it soon fizzled out. Instead, the priorities of many occupiers were determined by the spatial form they had created, demonstrating a socio-spatial dialectic in which the form of occupation was in turn shaping, and constraining, the social movement itself (Soja 1980). This narrowing of Occupy London's lived space of contention was produced through its strategic prioritising of place-based spatial practices combined with the subsequent fetishisation of the conceived space of the protest camp.

Occupy's prioritisation of the protest camp, an intensive place-based strategy of resistance and creation (Feigenbaum *et al.* 2013), can be understood from the vantage points of on-going contradictions in capitalist production and social movement organisation. Capital's contradiction between circulating and fixed capital not only leads to economic crises (Harvey 1982) but opens up political opportunities for social movements to turn territorial capitalist institutions into

fixed 'target spaces' (Sparke 2012). Aside from targeting the Stock Exchange, occupiers used the occupation to expose the City of London Corporation's (CoLC) role in providing an un-regulated tax haven to multinational corporations (see Shaxson 2012) with a working group created for that purpose. Just weeks since London's largest riot of a generation, occupiers saw a political opportunity in channelling popular rage onto a fixed target articulated 'in the face of the financial system'.<sup>3</sup> One occupier, Rachel, who lived in the neighbourhood where the riots started, framed this as her motivation for joining Occupy:

I found it really dramatic to think that we had created a generation of people that were so disempowered and dispossessed and didn't even know who the enemy was ...

From an organisational perspective, Occupy sought to resolve a tension in the previous alter-globalisation movements that, by mobilising across extensive, horizontal networks, prevented themselves from growing long-term roots. As alter-globalisation veteran Naomi Klein put it when speaking at Occupy Wall Street: 'we chose summits as our targets ... Summits are transient by nature, they only last a week. That made us transient too. We'd appear, grab world headlines, then disappear' (2011, np). Following the 2008 crisis and subsequent politics of austerity, there was a lack of grassroots institutional basis from which to mobilise (in the UK, but also elsewhere) and Occupy's open-ended occupations filled this void.

Social movements build networks through fixity in place and extensive relations strung across space (Nicholls 2009), and activist networks may be both topological and topographical (Routledge and Cumbers 2009). At any point in time, however, activists may emphasise more fixed or mobile forms and this may produce contradictions that inhibit a movement's capacity for social change (see also Schrader and Wachsmuth 2012). The protest camp provided a place-based spatial strategy that was appropriate for its historical moment, opening up a new repertoire of contention. Yet, by emphasising fixed, topographical networks, it posed a tension with Occupy's topologically conceived spaces and limited the capacity of its spatial practices. Thus, the attempt of small numbers of well-resourced 'imagineers' (Routledge 2008), many with experience from alter-globalisation movements, to build alliances and networks at multiple scales was hindered by a lack of interest or capacity from the majority of occupiers to follow through on this work and general assemblies were predominantly oriented to producing, representing and defending the protest camp. Many occupiers in London, as elsewhere, were fetishising the protest camp (Halvorsen 2017; Hammond 2013; Marcuse 2011; Miller and Nicholls 2013), embodying their identity and normative ideals in the

physical form of the occupation (Juris 2012). Paul, who camped at St Paul's, expressed this to me:

some people got lost, they couldn't see the woods from the trees, and all they could see was the camp, and didn't see any wider purpose ... so that was one of the problems, you get a group of people for who the camp is an end in itself.

This narrowing of perspective had a critical effect on the production of occupiers' lived space that shifted away from the global moment of 15 October 2011 towards an affective commitment to the place of the camp itself as the basis for creating social change. This fetishisation of the camp posed dilemmas for Occupy London, both leading to internal hierarchies as I explore below, but also posing strategic limitations. First, although creating a place-based target space generated some media coverage of financial and political inequality and occupiers were invited to dialogue with some financial institutions based in the City of London, Occupy London had little contact or impact on material spatial practices of power and governance that are nested at more expansive scales and require concerted spatial strategies (cf. Miller 2000; Nicholls 2011). Second, the reluctance to mobilise across topological social movement networks limited the resources and reach of Occupy London's spatial practices, which, as it became increasingly inward looking, led many to lose touch and feel alienated from the movement's overarching aims, with visibly dwindling numbers of occupiers over the months.

These issues were partially resolved following the eviction at St Paul's on 28 February 2012, reopening occupiers' lived space to extensive networks. As one (ex-)occupier, Tania, told me 'quite shortly after the eviction I started feeling really very relieved that we could finally put our energies into other things other than the camp'. Indeed, the post-camp months saw an explosion of energy into re-building Occupy's global network, resulting in the project 'Occupy May' that saw two global days of action, on 12 and 15 May, to coincide with movements in North America and Europe. Nevertheless, although some sub-groups of occupiers remained active over subsequent months and years, in many cases the strong-tie bonds developed in the protest camp were lost and activists struggled to define their lived space, presenting a new set of strategic dilemmas.

## Autonomous geographies and internal hierarchies

Occupy London, as elsewhere, represented a disillusionment with capitalist institutions and liberal democracy, especially in the wake of the 2008 crisis, and a desire to prefigure non-hierarchical forms of organising

(Graeber 2013; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Vasudevan 2015a). As its first public statement read: 'The current system is unsustainable. It is undemocratic and unjust. We need alternatives; this is where we work towards them'.<sup>4</sup> Key to Occupy's spatial strategy was attempts to forge what Pickerill and Chatterton term 'autonomous geographies': relational spaces of resistance and creation 'where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organisation' (2006, 1). These are lived spaces of dreams for better worlds (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006), but depend heavily on perceived (materially practised) and conceived (representations) spaces to sustain them, and it is here that the contradictions arose for Occupy London.

Many occupiers were mobilised by an alienation from mainstream politics and its failure to generate a lived space for its strategy of austerity. Martha, who camped at St Paul's from 15 October, told me:

I didn't know anything about politics to be honest. The only thing I knew, like a lot of people, is like the government is shit basically, they are mugging us over ...

This reflected the government's decision not to directly address people's everyday needs, spending £500 billion to bailout the banks while cutting welfare and social spending (e.g. tripling of university tuition fees, capping benefit payments, cuts to disability support). Austerity measures had a particularly negative impact at a local level, with basic services often being withdrawn (e.g. child care, library provision) and neighbourhood communities asked to rebuild their support networks through voluntarism and enterprise under the banner of the Conservative's 'Big Society' (CLES 2014; Featherstone *et al.* 2012). This crisis of welfare in austerity Britain (Brown *et al.* 2013) provided a political opportunity for Occupy London to create a counter-space of representation (lived space) for the so-called 99 per cent to develop an inclusive, democratic self-managed community.<sup>5</sup>

Occupy London's proposal to forge a 'real-and-imagined' (Soja 1996) counter-space in central London led to an influx of people seeking refuge in a place-based community, generating tensions in occupiers' spatial practices. Rocia, an ex-addict who dedicated her time on camp to looking after the vulnerable, told me how many occupiers, including the homeless and people suffering from mental health issues and drug addiction, perceived the camp as a welcoming space of care: 'they thought Occupy was a more loving environment that didn't involve so much living around total chaos, it was more positive generally'. Occupy London's limited resources were quickly stretched by the ongoing labour of social reproduction and care, posing a dilemma for occupiers' perceived space. Paul, who was involved in the Outreach working group, told me:

A lot of the people there really didn't know why we were there and had no idea, they were just there, and it is fair enough if people want to live, if homeless people want to live there, they're free to do so, but I think we sort of got distracted a lot by, we weren't focusing on the movement ...

Paul hints at a division between the spatial practices of living and social reproduction and those of doing activism in 'the movement'. This division soon led to clear hierarchies, as Jane, who camped at St Paul's, described:

There was such a division between physical and organizational, you know theoretical labour at the camp, and you know there was a real lack of respect for people who didn't express themselves in an intellectual language and a real readiness to allow the people who were professionals and professional talkers ... to determine what the message of Occupy was going to be, and so that was a really deep problem.

The 'professional' group of Occupiers drew on extensive networks beyond the camp (e.g. with journalists and academics), and were able to create representations of space that had wide reach. Moreover, many of them lived off site and did not rely on the material space of the camp (although their representations of space remained tied to the spaces of occupation). In contrast, those occupiers maintaining Occupy's material space of living had little reach beyond the place of the camp and were often marginalised in meetings, lacking both time and skills to participate. Moreover, most of them lived and relied on the camp's infrastructure. This division became spatially constituted in the camp and generated a visible class divide. Simon, who did shifts in the Info Tent but lived off site, described this to me:

There were two camps in a way, there was a class divide I always felt, there was the middle-class at the Info Tent and the working-class were at the kitchen end, which was quite an interesting thing to see and I hardly went up that top end ... I would describe them as upper and lower LSX ... one was more the intellectual space and one more the living space maybe ...

The 'upper' camp was located on the main road near the Cathedral's entrance, providing the visible, public face to Occupy, where most visitors would gather, while the 'lower' camp was tucked away behind the Cathedral, hidden from immediate public view, thus posing additional tensions in occupiers' differing capacities to create spaces of representation.<sup>6</sup> In response, several weeks into occupation, the 'lower' camp began to confront dominant spaces of representation, intervening, at times violently, in general assemblies, rejecting the often complex, intellectualised process of consensus decision-making, demanding greater access to resources (e.g. media, finance) and criticising the small group of occupiers creating the space of representation.

This eventually led key working groups from the 'upper' camp, such as media and finance, to meet off camp, detaching themselves from the material production of Occupy's space. Despite the same desire to create a lived space of autonomy, Occupy was being pulled apart and becoming an unpleasant space. Simon summarised the transition in his relation to Occupy's lived space: 'I used be proud of being part of Occupy London and that slowly dissipated such that now I am embarrassed'.

The tensions in the spatiality of conceived and perceived spaces also took on a gendered dimension, with a small group of women assuming key tasks of welfare and domestic labour. Maria, from the welfare working group, told me:

welfare is the hardest work, it's the work that nobody wanted to do ... they were just busy, they had other stuff to do, everyone was fighting for a better world, and you know that's how these things get missed.

Similarly, Miranda, from recycling and waste, told me she was often brought to tears due to exhaustion and lack of support for work that many 'didn't find sexy enough or revolutionary enough to actually care about'. The burden of spatial practices of social reproduction fell on a small group of women who also suffered the insecurity of looking after vulnerable people in an open space in central London. In response, female occupiers sought to construct their own spaces of representation and mobilise resources through extra-local networks. For example, a callout was made for professional welfare support on camp, providing much needed resources, and a women's network of occupiers developed across the different camps in the UK, tapping into the skills and experiences of established feminist networks (e.g. Global Women's Strike). Although these strategies enhanced the resources of gendered spatial practices, they did little to address the underlying tensions in material spatial practices.

Occupy London relied on a spatial division of labour in its perceived and conceived space, posing a core dilemma in its aim to prefigure an alternative lived space of community. Miller and Nicholls (2013, 467) highlight this 'flaw' in protest camp strategy, and point to the unrealistic requirement that occupiers drastically alter their everyday spatial activity. In Occupy London the burden of material spatial practice took on class and gendered dimensions due to the differing capacity of occupiers to mobilise resources and representations of space beyond the place of occupation. In the post-camp phase, Occupy London sought to address this contradiction, in part by working with neighbourhood-based organisations that have had greater success at building lasting networks of support, integrated into the spatial practices of a community's everyday life (e.g. child care sharing), a spatial strategy that also developed in

movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the *indignados* (Miller and Nicholls 2013; Moreno-Caballud and Sitrin 2011). In part, this shift is a question of scale and the need for social movements to address the disjuncture between what Cox (1998) terms 'spaces of dependence' and 'spaces of engagement' (see also Miller 2000). It also involves a transformation in occupiers' lived spaces, away from the prefigurative place of the protest camp and towards spatialities more rooted in everyday life. This highlights the constraints on 'real-and-imagined' thirdspaces that, although they may appear as strategic priorities (Soja 1996), rely on tensions in perceived and conceived spaces. Shifts in spatial strategy towards neighbourhood organising are unlikely to resolve underlying contradictions, however, and present new dilemmas, such as how much of the state's crisis of social reproduction should be absorbed by community activists. Spatial dialectics points towards no synthesis, only unfolding strategic dilemmas in spatial praxis.

## Territoriality and power

Occupation is a popular *territorial* strategy of social movements, controlling demarcated space to both resist (e.g. privatisation) and create (e.g. new subjectivities and values). Although Anglophone human geographers have largely examined territoriality as the top-down exertion of power *over* space, following Sack's (1986) seminal definition, there is growing acknowledgement that territoriality is also produced from below by social movements (Routledge 2015; Vasudevan 2015b), presenting overlapping (Agnew and Oslender 2013) and clashing (Zibechi 2012) territorial claims to that of the state and dominant institutions. How the relationship between these two territorial logics unfolds is decisive in determining the outcomes of social movement occupations. This relation also poses a tension in the lived space of occupation, torn between the legitimacy of bottom-up autonomous claims on space and the state's sovereign rights. The territorial strategies of occupiers and dominant institutions will vary depending on particular circumstances of legitimacy. In the first night of Occupy London, when eviction looked possible, support from the (soon to be ex-) canon of St Paul's Cathedral, which owned part of the land being occupied, was crucial in delegitimising the use of state violence. Instead, occupiers entered a lengthy legal battle with the City of London Corporation (CoLC), who also owned part of the occupied land, and this became the central battleground in the lived space of Occupy London's territorial strategy. In turn, however, this opened up contradictions in the perceived and conceived moments of Occupy's territoriality, posing dilemmas for the movement.

Occupy London's territorial strategy involved both a legal defence of the occupation and also the broader



contestation of the territoriality of private property, asserting the right to produce overlapping material practices and representations of territory that challenge exclusive ideas of sovereignty and develop self-managed forms of governance. On 17 November 2011, the CoLC initiated proceedings for possession and injunctions through the High Court, pinning notices on tents around camp. Although a few occupiers ignored the notices, refusing to enter into any negotiation, the majority of occupiers realised that negotiation was essential, both in terms of defending the camp and also the potential to set legal precedents for future protest camps. As occupier Rachel told me:

there was always a possibility that the law could be stretched and changed and in that case I don't think that we could have walked away because it would have been ignoring the possibility of changing something.

Over the coming days, the legal working group developed its strategy, bringing together expert lawyers with experienced activists. Camp meetings were increasingly taken up by discussions of legalities, and from late November until the end of occupation groups of occupiers went to court each day, watching the dock proceedings or standing in solidarity outside, often gaining media attention. In this way Occupy London's production of territoriality became gradually entangled with the state-legal apparatus and the CoLC's territorial claims. Although there was a sense by occupiers that this relationship had a potential for social change – both in terms of the legal precedents and allowing the protest camp to continue – there was less reflection on how power relations were unfolding on camp through the production of territoriality.

In order to produce territoriality from below – opening up space to diverse encounters and new social relations, including experiments with consensus decision-making and popular education (see Halvorsen 2015b) – Occupy London was obliged to internalise dominant territorial material practices and representations. Although mobilised in opposition to hierarchical decision-making, occupiers had to develop a territorial organisation capable of representing itself in court. The format of the high court meant that one named defendant had to be nominated (although others could participate), providing a challenge to Occupy London's claim to leaderless organisation.<sup>7</sup> Martha, who became the sole defendant, told me

it was basically a situation where had we not have had a named defendant we wouldn't even get a chance to say a bloody word in our defence ... and in which case they would have just written the order and we would have been gone.

Despite doing her utmost to represent discussions from general assemblies in court, this was inevitably an impossible task, given the diversity of opinions on

camp. There was thus a clash between Occupy's desire to represent its territoriality through consensus decision-making and the need for a clear and coherent legal argument to be pursued in court. This tension was confounded by the heavy reliance of occupiers on the experience and knowledge of a small group of lawyers and activists. The technical-legal language of court was difficult to translate on camp and participating in the legal battle required a level of commitment that most occupiers did not have time for. It soon became clear that Occupy London's territorial strategy was dominated by the material practices and representation of space of a small group of well-resourced and experienced individuals with limited means for broader participation. As the legal case gained momentum, some occupiers became concerned that the occupation was being managed through 'control points'. Simon reflected on this to me:

suddenly these control points started to appear ... the fact that we fought the court case without any actual real discussion about those things, these kind of clandestine decisions made on the behalf of people who hadn't been part of it ...

The legal battle presented a particular contradiction for Occupy because, no matter how transparent and open the legal working group attempted to be, there was a daily need (in the court room) to operate within the dominant institutional apparatus and 'political technologies' of state territoriality (Elden 2013). Similar tensions have been highlighted in research on squatters movements, noting both a tendency for activists to become institutionalised within hierarchical territorial structures (Martínez 2013) and dominant groups to form around those with what Kadir (2010) terms 'squatters' capital': skills and experience of building occupations. In Occupy, the seemingly external logic of top-down territoriality was gradually internalised in camp through mundane material practices (e.g. occupiers were required to remove several tents to create passages in case of fire emergencies) and conditions imposed on its representations of space (e.g. horizontal decision-making embedded in a vertical, scalar structure). This led to a noticeable shift in the lived space being produced through Occupy's territorial strategy, from prefigurative claims of self-governance and the counter-territoriality of occupation towards a space of negotiation and lobbying, using the court case to push for new legal precedents on public space occupation (which were largely unsuccessful). This led to a rift within occupiers, with some leaving the movement around the time the court case got underway and others staying involved but increasingly concerned about the direction the movement was headed. Ultimately, an eviction notice was served and the St Paul's camp was cleared, by which stage the occupation had come to

signify quite different things to different occupiers, making on-going organisation increasingly challenging post-camp.

Occupy London's production of territoriality was an inherently contradictory process, torn between two logics that can be understood within Lefebvre's (1991, 165) dialectic of appropriation-domination, two 'opposite and inseparable' processes. This is not the same as what Allen terms an 'oppositional rhetoric' in which 'power is something that can be identified, pushed back, interrupted' (2003, 186). Dialectical thinkers such as Lefebvre never think of domination as 'from above and "over there"' (Allen 2003, 186), but something generated internally through spatial practice and representation. Territorial strategies typically involve building a relation with overlapping and clashing territorialities and this leads to dilemmas and contradictions. Inevitably, activist territorialities become engaged in relations with the state and activists have to think carefully about how to organise their material practices and representations of space in that context, taking into account how this may alter the lived space of the movement. Post 2011, several occupation-based movements have gradually moved towards a politics of territorial institutional engagement and, in some cases, active participation. This is most clearly the case in the Spanish radical municipal movements and the *Podemos* party, which developed in part from the *indignados*, while the grassroots mobilisation within the Labour party indicates a possible move in this direction in the UK, although the links to Occupy are less direct. Such shifts in territorial strategy are unlikely to remove the contradictions of activist territoriality, but will pose a different set of dilemmas and strategic challenges, as the contemporary experiences of Latin American social movements indicate (see Rossi and Bülow 2015).

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that spatial dialectics provides an analytical approach for understanding how and why contradictions develop within social movements' spatial praxis. By abstracting to Occupy London's historical and geographical moments it has demonstrated how in pursuing particular spatial strategies occupiers created tensions that undermined their original aims and goals, posing contradictions that led to new spatial strategies. As Harvey recently summarised, contradictions are not inherently 'bad' and can be crucial for progressive change, yet they do 'have the nasty habit of not being resolved but merely moved around' (2014, 4). Spatial dialectics demonstrates that contradictions do not only unfold historically but also geographically, thus moving away from a teleological understanding of social movements that has long dominated sociological approaches (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 2004; cf. Miller 2000;

Nicholls 2011). Building on recent attempts to operationalise multiple spatialities as an analytical approach (Miller 2013), this paper shifts attention to contradiction as a key factor in spatial mobilisation. It argued that the recent turn to assemblage thought is ill-equipped for such a task and there is greater need to confront the inherently antagonistic nature of social movement spatiality. I end by reiterating and learning from the key contradictions of Occupy London.

First, movements must make strategic decisions between mobilising networks across extensive topological spaces and intensive topographic places. Although territorial and relational networks are not mutually exclusive (Nicholls 2009; Routledge and Cumbers 2009), activists must nevertheless make decisions about how to invest the limited resources in their spatial practices and what representations of space to prioritise. These framings will be influenced by and in turn shape the lived space of networks. As Nicholls (2011) argues, the mobilisation of social movement networks often requires intensive place-based relations, which in turn generates a spatial unevenness between powerful cores and weaker peripheries, leading to antagonism and fragmentation among activists. A key concern of Occupy was the tendency for occupiers to fetishise the protest camp, holding its global networks hostage to place and causing a rift in occupiers' lived experience. It is noticeable that most 2011 camp-based movements have not reproduced protest camps in subsequent years. Yet spatial dialectics highlights that contradictions will not be resolved teleologically. Constant attention must be given to the ways in which spatial forms of activism co-constitute wider networks, the 'unevenness' of social movement space (Nicholls 2011) and the subsequent tensions in the conceived, perceived and lived spaces of mobilisation.

Second, strategies to produce 'autonomous geographies' require divisions in material spatial practices that may pose contradictions in the lived space being produced. In particular, place-based projects to build autonomous community require a difficult balance between spatial practices of social reproduction and intellectual work of 'activism'. This tension has long plagued autonomous spaces such as squats (Kadir 2010; Vasudevan 2015a) and protest camps (Feigenbaum *et al.* 2013), which often struggle to resolve it. A key consideration is how the spatial form of protest coincides, or not, with everyday spatialities of social reproduction (Miller and Nicholls 2013) and the differing capacity of social groups (e.g. class, gender) to negotiate and represent such divides. Social movements may respond with spatial strategies that scale-up or network their perceived and conceived spaces of prefigurative organisation, but this is likely to shift contradictions to new spatialities rather than resolve them.

Third, the production of territoriality by social movements has to develop a strategy for relating to dominant territorial claims, tied to the state, which poses dilemmas in the lived space of occupation, torn between the legitimacy of two opposed yet entangled logics. The spatial practices and representations of activist territoriality are obliged to develop an organisational form capable of negotiating power with dominant institutions. Occupy London's territorial strategy relied on a subgroup of experts. While this allowed other occupiers to continue their territorial activism, it led to a clear hierarchy and concerns over 'control points', gradually subsuming dominant territorial claims into Occupy's lived space. The territorial strategies of social movements may involve more or less direct confrontation or involvement in dominant institutional practices, but the spatial dialectics of appropriation-domination presents an on-going contradiction in grassroots struggles for counter-spaces (Lefebvre 1991).

Spatial dialectics directs attention to the unfolding of social movements' contradictory spatial practices and the case study presented here only gives a snapshot of particular dilemmas that developed in the protest-camp phase of mobilisation. Despite recognition of the many divides and tensions that cut through Occupy (e.g. Juris *et al.* 2012), there is a greater need to appreciate the inherently contradictory nature of social movements, in particular by reflecting on the role that spatiality plays in their mobilisation. The growing interest in the multiple spatialities of contention (Nicholls *et al.* 2013) can be further developed by explicitly acknowledging how the spatial strategies of social movements more often than not plant the seeds of their own demise, at minimum requiring a change in spatial priority while at times leading to de-mobilisation. Contradictions are not confined to the abstract space of capitalist production but are inevitable to any grassroots production of space (Lefebvre 1991). In the quest to change the world, social movements appropriate space and this creates tensions between how space is practised, imagined and directly lived, placing them in what Lefebvre terms 'the dialectical relationship between "possible and "impossible"' (1991, 60). The radical potential implied in movements such as Occupy can only be fully appreciated once these tensions are brought to the surface and analysed.

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## Notes

- 1 Activists continue mobilising under the banner of Occupy London at the time of writing (<http://occupylondon.org.uk/> Accessed 1 November 2016).
- 2 See initial statement and global democracy statement (<http://occupylondon.org.uk/about-2/> Accessed 1 November 2016).
- 3 <http://occupylondon.org.uk/occupylsx-callout-lets-do-this/> Accessed 1 November 2016.
- 4 <http://occupylondon.org.uk/about-2/> Accessed 1 November 2016.
- 5 See initial statement and other public declarations by Occupy London (<http://occupylondon.org.uk/about-2/> Accessed 1 November 2016).
- 6 Similar spatial divisions of labour were also noted in other camps, see Franck and Huang (2012).
- 7 <http://occupylondon.org.uk/about/statements/statement-of-autonomy/> Accessed 1 November 2016.

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